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DEVELOPING BRAND- AND PR-BUILDING STRATEGY FOR MEDIA EDUCATION

In contemporary PR education, brand- and image-building strategies have become essential elements for creating competitive and recognizable educational products. Moving beyond conventional marketing activities, universities are increasingly focusing on developing strong brand identities and positive institutional images that emphasize education-industry linkages. The goal of this article is to explore the formation and advancement of brand- and image-building strategies through the case study of the Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU). First, it provides a literature review and an analysis of global practices in branding and marketing of PR and media education. Second, it offers an assessment of the entrepreneurial and educational environment and educational context for brand- and PR-building strategy in Kazakhstan, and a review of relevant theoretical and empirical research. Third, it introduces the case study the branding of a MBA programs, highlighting how a coherent brand identity and image-building efforts can enhance program attractiveness and competitiveness. The article concludes by outlining the key features, challenges, and future prospects for developing brand and image strategies for in the field of higher education.

Keywords: brand-building, PR-building, media education, MBA, EMBA, Kazakhstan, agribusiness, university marketing.

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Медия білім беру саласында брэндинг және PR стратегияларын дамыту

Қазіргі PR білім беру жүйесінде брэндинг пен имиджмейкинг стратегиялары бәсекеге қабілетті әрі танымал білім беру өнімдерін қалыптастырудың маңызды элементтеріне айналды. Дәстүрлі маркетингтік іс-әрекеттерден тыс, университеттер барған сайын білім мен индустрия арасындағы байланыстарды айқындастын тұркты брэндтік сәйкестік пен он институционалдық имиджді дамытуға басымдық беруде. Бұл мақаланың мәселе – Қазақ, ұлттық, аграрлық, зерттеу университетінің (KazNARU) мысалында брэндинг пен имиджмейкинг стратегияларының қалыптасуы мен дамуын талдау. Біріншіден, мақалада PR және медиа білім беру саласындағы брэндинг пен маркетингтің жаһандық, тәжірибелеріне шолу жасалып, әдебиеттерге талдау үсінілады. Екіншіден, Қазақстандағы кәсіпкерлік және білім беру ортасына, сондай-ақ брэнд пен PR стратегияларын дамытуға ықпал ететін білім беру контекстіне баға беріліп, тиісті теориялық және әмпирикалық зерттеулер қарастырылады. Ушіншіден, MBA бағдарламаларын брэндингтеу бойынша кейс үсінілып, келісімді брэндтік сәйкестік пен жүйелі имиджмейкинг әрекеттерінің бағдарламалардың тартымдылығы мен бәсекеге қабілеттілігін арттырудың рөлі көрсетіледі. Мақала жоғары білім беру саласында брэнд пен имидж стратегияларын дамытудың негізгі ерекшеліктерін, сын-қатерлерін және болашақтағы мүмкіндіктерін айқындаумен аяқталады.

Түйін сөздер: брэндинг, имиджмейкинг, PR, медиа білім беру, MBA, EMBA, Қазақстан, агробизнес, университеттік маркетинг.

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Стратегия построения бренда и PR в области медиаобразования

В современном образовательном дискурсе в области связей с общественностью стратегии брэндинга и имиджмейкинга выступают как ключевые инструменты формирования конкурентоспособных и узнаваемых образовательных продуктов. Университеты всё более активно выходят за рамки традиционного маркетинга, концентрируясь на разработке устойчивой

бренд-идентичности и позитивного институционального имиджа, отражающего взаимосвязь образования и индустрии. Цель статьи заключается в анализе процессов формирования и развития стратегий брендинга и имиджмейкинга на примере Казахского национального аграрного исследовательского университета (KazNARU). Во-первых, представлен обзор литературы и анализ международных практик в области брендинга и маркетинга программ по связям с общественностью и медиаобразованию.

Во-вторых, дана оценка предпринимательской и образовательной среды Казахстана, а также рассмотрен образовательный контекст, способствующий формированию стратегии брендинга и PR, включая анализ релевантных теоретических и эмпирических исследований. В-третьих, предложен кейс по брендингу программ MBA, демонстрирующий, каким образом согласованная бренд-идентичность и системные усилия по имиджмейкингу могут повысить привлекательность и конкурентоспособность образовательных программ. В заключение обозначены ключевые характеристики, вызовы и перспективы развития стратегий брендинга и имиджмейкинга в сфере высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: брендинг, имиджмейкинг, PR, медиаобразование, MBA, EMBA, Казахстан, агробизнес, университетский маркетинг.

1. Introduction

The promotion of PR and media education in higher education institutions (HEIs) has undergone a profound transformation in recent years, shifting from traditional marketing approaches to strategies that emphasize brand-building and PR management. The rapid progression of digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), and tools such as ChatGPT has significantly expanded the capabilities of universities to assess, design, and promote business and media education products (Sujata Joshi, Sonali Bhattacharya, et al., 2025). These technologies provide innovative instruments for shaping the brand identity of educational institutions and for enhancing their visibility and reputation in increasingly competitive global markets.

Modern strategies for promoting PR and media education now operate across both national and international arenas, requiring integration into global educational networks, digital media ecosystems, and knowledge-based economies (Czinkota, M. R., Ronkainen, I. A., & Moffett, M. H., 2009). Media and business schools must develop a coherent brand narrative and PR strategy that conveys their ability to produce graduates equipped with the skills and competencies necessary for success in diverse educational contexts, e.g. in Kazakhstan. At the same time, they must remain agile, responding effectively to disruptive events such as the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), which have reshaped the demands placed on both business education and its communication strategies.

The contemporary challenge lies in integrating digital transformation and emerging disruptive technologies into university branding strategies while aligning with the dynamic requirements of labor markets worldwide. Universities face the difficult task of balancing these pressures with the con-

straints of limited budgets, time, and institutional frameworks. As a result, brand-building is no longer just about promotion—it is about crafting a long-term identity, value proposition, and trust among stakeholders (Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L., 2016; Belch, G.E., & Belch, M. A., 2018).

Furthermore, HEI must maintain a delicate equilibrium between preserving academic traditions and innovating educational content. This includes the integration of new specializations, interdisciplinary courses, media resources, and experiential learning modules that reflect the evolving needs of employers and industries (Aaker, D. A., & Moorman, C., 2017). In Kazakhstan, universities such as Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU) have been actively working on modernizing entrepreneurship education, adopting branding and PR-building strategies to attract both domestic and international students (Zhanibek, A., Abazov, R., & Khazbulatov, A., 2022).

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in optimizing the educational process, enhancing the quality of business, media, and increasingly globalizing learning environment, and developing stronger brand identities for universities, especially in Kazakhstan. Addressing these issues requires innovative marketing communication channels, strategic storytelling, and brand differentiation to build competitive and recognizable educational offerings in the modern education landscape.

1.1. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Problem Statement

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of branding and PR in higher education, universities in Kazakhstan still face challenges in building and communicating a distinctive and competitive brand identity. While numerous studies have

addressed the promotion and marketing of business education globally and within Kazakhstan (Jong-in Choi & Stephen Markham, 2019), the strategic development of a brand and PR-building framework remains underexplored. The rapid evolution of labor market demands, the rise of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the increasing role of digital transformation have created new expectations for business and media schools. These factors require universities to go beyond traditional marketing, PR campaigns, and focus on creating strong, trust-based, and recognizable brands that highlight their unique value propositions (National Project “Quality Education – Educated Nation”, 2021).

MBA programs—especially niche programs such as those in agro-entrepreneurship—are at the early stage of developing coherent brand identities. There is a pressing need to strengthen program reputation, update curricula to reflect market trends, and establish effective image-building strategies through international cooperation, digital presence, and strategic communication with stakeholders (Bianca Ifeoma Chigbu et al., 2023). Overcoming such challenges requires a holistic brand-building strategy that combines both local and global best practices.

Research Objectives

The goals of the current research are as follows:

1. To review theoretical and practical bases of brand- and image-construction strategies in PR education with an emphasis on the higher education sector.
2. Evaluating a case study – current practices of MBA branding at Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU) and identification of strengths & gaps.
3. To evaluate how international cooperation and online forums (e.g., social media, exchange programs) contribute to establishing a good brand image for MBA programs.
4. To create a strategic framework for brand building and PR that can enhance the competitiveness and marketability of MBA programs in Kazakhstan and international markets.
5. To provide actionable recommendations for universities to transition from traditional marketing tactics to holistic brand-building strategies aligned with evolving labor market needs.

2. Literature Review

The evolution of higher education marketing has seen a marked shift from conventional promotional

methods to strategic brand-building and PR management. Early research predominantly focused on student recruitment tactics, traditional media campaigns, and direct marketing techniques. However, these methods have proven insufficient in today's competitive and globalized educational environment (Ivy, 2001). Scholars argue that branding in higher education is not merely an extension of marketing but a strategic endeavor that communicates an institution's values, reputation, and long-term positioning (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Chapleo, 2010).

2.1. From Marketing to Brand-Building in Higher Education

Historically higher education marketing publications were largely about strategies to attract prospective students through advertising campaigns with traditional media and publicity materials. However, recent literature argues that such strategies grow increasingly unfit for a highly competitive education market. As Aaker and Moorman (2017) remark, branding is more than an extension of marketing or publicity but is itself a strategic behavior that creates trust, communicates values, and forms a long-term relationship with stakeholders. Branding higher business education is more than promoting programs for an MBA; it is to create a consistent identity that appeals to students, industry partners, alumni, and even employers.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes brand equity in higher education—which encompasses brand awareness, perceived quality, and institutional associations—plays a decisive role in student enrollment decisions and alumni loyalty (Wilson & Gilligan, 2012; Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2014). This shift from a marketing-centric to a brand-centric model has led business schools to focus on crafting narratives about their strengths, values, and global positioning rather than relying solely on short-term promotional tactics.

2.2. Digital Transformation and Institutional Image

The digital revolution and the rise of AI-based technologies, such as ChatGPT, have further transformed how business schools develop and maintain their brand identity. Researchers such as Gibreel et al. (2025) have explored the role of digital marketing and user-generated content, demonstrating that digital narratives, social media engagement, and e-word-of-mouth strongly influence student perceptions. Unlike traditional marketing, digital platforms provide two-way communication, enabling universities to engage directly with potential students and stakeholders, thereby shaping institutional image in real-time.

Nesterenko, V., Miskiewicz, R., & Abazov, R. (2023), and Kwilinski, A., et al (2022) highlight how digital transformation tools and behavioral reasoning models are now employed to refine messaging, personalize outreach, and enhance the student experience. These digital innovations allow universities to integrate image-building efforts with brand consistency, ensuring that every point of contact—whether online or offline—reinforces the institution's core values and competitive advantages.

The adoption of digital branding strategies is particularly relevant for emerging economies such as Kazakhstan, where universities must compete not only regionally but also internationally. Business schools in cities like Almaty and Astana are leveraging digital platforms to communicate their strengths in entrepreneurship and specialized programs like agro-entrepreneurship (Enbek, 2023).

2.3. The Role of Institutional Reputation and Alumni Networks

A robust institutional reputation is a critical component of brand-building in media and PR education. Studies by Drozhenko (2018) and Enbek (2023) emphasize that alumni success stories, corporate partnerships, and industry linkages significantly enhance the perceived credibility of MBA programs. Alumni act as brand ambassadors, and their achievements in the corporate and entrepreneurial sectors reinforce the image of the institution.

For Kazakhstani media and business schools, alumni achievements and corporate linkages are vital to building trust in relatively young MBA programs. Nesterenko, Miskiewicz, and Abazov (2023) argue that in emerging markets, where business education is still evolving, leveraging alumni success stories can significantly enhance institutional image. Universities with well-articulated brand identities can better differentiate themselves in a crowded global marketplace, attract top-tier faculty, and foster long-term relationships with industry stakeholders (Nesterenko, Miskiewicz, & Abazov, 2023).

2.4. Literature on Business Education in Kazakhstan

The literature on business education in Kazakhstan reveals both progress and gaps in the adoption of brand-building strategies. Scholars such as Monabayeva (2014) have noted that entrepreneurship and business education in Kazakhstan were historically shaped by economic faculties, with limited emphasis on practical branding and image-building. However, over the last decade, there has been a shift

toward aligning business programs with global standards, adopting digital marketing tools, and integrating international best practices.

The Electronic Labor Exchange Portal (Enbek, 2023) and studies such as the OECD (2020) report on Kazakhstan's skills strategy highlight the growing need for business schools to adapt to the changing labor market. While traditional marketing campaigns (e.g., advertisements, recruitment fairs) remain relevant, researchers argue that creating a strong institutional brand—anchored in values such as innovation, industry alignment, and global outlook—has become essential for MBA programs to remain competitive.

Kazakhstani universities like AlmaU, KIMEP, and KazNARU have begun experimenting with brand-building approaches by introducing specialized MBA tracks, engaging industry leaders, and establishing international partnerships. However, as Abazov (2023) points out, these initiatives are still in their early stages, and many universities continue to rely on conventional marketing approaches rather than comprehensive brand strategies.

2.5. Global Best Practices and Local Adaptation

International literature offers valuable lessons on how universities can successfully integrate brand-building and PR strategies. Kotler and Keller (2016) argue that effective educational branding involves:

1. Differentiation – identifying unique program attributes that set the institution apart.
2. Consistency – ensuring all messaging and communication channels reinforce the same core brand identity.
3. Engagement – fostering meaningful interactions with students, alumni, and industry partners.

Many leading universities across the world, such as Harvard Business School or INSEAD, have demonstrated how storytelling, experiential learning, case-studies methods, capstone hands-on projects, internships at leading international companies, and alumni networks can be used to build powerful institutional brands. These approaches can be adapted in Kazakhstan to strengthen images and brand-recognition, which has the potential to become a unique and competitive educational product.

2.6. Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite extensive research on marketing in higher education, gaps remain in understanding how brand-building strategies can be adapted to emerging markets like Kazakhstan. Most studies focus on Western business schools, with limited analysis of

how institutional branding can be localized to reflect cultural, economic, and industry-specific realities. Moreover, longitudinal studies taking into account how brand-building strategies lead to long-term retention of students, results for employability, and organizational sustainability are lacking.

There is information in literature that shifting from marketing to brand building and management of an institutional image is critical and strategic to today's higher education institutions. Even though Kazakhstani institutions were successful with applying marketing tools, they should now shift to establishing integrated and distinctive brand positions to highlight their unique value propositions, e.g., efficient industry linkages or sector specialization (e.g., agriculture). To achieve such a shift, schools of business should combine international best practices with local demands, leverage digital media, and engage directly with alumni as well as industry stakeholders.

3. Educational Context

The development of professional education in Kazakhstan has been shaped by a distinctive historical trajectory, with entrepreneurship training and MBA programs primarily emerging within the structure of economic faculties. Traditionally, these programs prioritized the study of theories and conceptual frameworks over practical, hands-on skills and managerial competencies. This academic bias limited the ability of graduates to engage with real-world business challenges, particularly in dynamic sectors such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and agro-entrepreneurship.

In recent years, however, a paradigm shift has taken place as universities begin to recognize the necessity of moving beyond traditional marketing to establish strong institutional brands and reputational capital. While marketing efforts were initially focused on program visibility—such as advertising or student recruitment—today's leading institutions are investing in brand identity, value propositions, and image-building strategies that resonate with both students and employers (Schlesinger, W., Cervera-Taulet, A., & Wymer, W. (2021).

3.1. Emergence of Innovative Business Schools

Universities such as KBTU, KIMEP, and AlmaU have pioneered this transformation. These institutions were founded with the vision of introducing globally oriented business programs, including MBA and EMBA degrees, which integrate practical

skills, entrepreneurship, and industry collaboration. Their success demonstrates the growing importance of branding as a competitive advantage, with each school cultivating a distinct image based on international standards, faculty expertise, and corporate partnerships.

Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU), with a specialist focus on agro-entrepreneurship, is also changing. Rather than having recourse to extensive mainstream marketing promotion campaigns, KazNARU is positioning its MBA as a niche learning brand with a specific focus on its core competence in agribusiness, innovation, and international cooperation. It is a trend aligned with broader cross-national trends wherein business schools stand out with unique sectoral expertise or niche-focused programme specialities.

3.2. Policy Support and Regulatory Changes

It has been government policy to encourage universities to be more innovative with their teaching and branding. It has been recognised by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science (MHES) that there is a need to complement practical skills and non-formal learning with higher education. For instance, the 2018 Order of the Minister of Education and Science on recognizing non-formal education marked a shift toward acknowledging alternative learning pathways that support workforce readiness and entrepreneurial competencies.

However, while universities have been granted greater autonomy to develop curricula and shape their institutional identity, regulatory oversight remains significant. The MHES framework, coupled with national projects such as “Quality Education – Educated Nation” (2021), continues to emphasize quality assurance and alignment with national labor market needs. As a result, business schools are challenged to balance brand innovation with compliance and academic standards.

3.3. Dynamics of the Labor Market and Institutional Image

Kazakhstan's rapidly evolving labor market has heightened the demand for graduates with practical competencies, international perspectives, and strong emphasis on soft skills. “Enbek: Atlas of New Professions and Competencies” (2023) also stresses rising relevance to emerging AI sectors, digital transformations, and entrepreneurial ecosystems. To remain relevant, universities should build brands that also convey a message about how they align with trends so they can be perceived as credible providers of high-value business education.

It has also led to image-building strategies employing digital instruments—social media campaigns, interactive multimedia information, and collaboration with industry leaders—to build a reputation for excellence. Alumni achievements and globalization of exchange programs increasingly figure in an institution's branding initiatives because they are quality indicators for programs as much as a signal about competitiveness internationally.

3.4. Difficulties and opportunities

Even though development is being recorded, most universities in Kazakhstan still face a challenge shifting to strategic brand-building from traditional marketing. Limited budgets, regulatory constraints, and the slow pace of curriculum modernization often hinder efforts to create differentiated brand identities. Nevertheless, opportunities exist in leveraging international collaborations and trainings, double-degree programs with leading universities around the world, and experiential learning to enhance institutional images and attract both domestic and international students.

Kazakhstan's leading universities, particularly those with specialized MBAs, are now tasked with creating cohesive brand narratives that highlight their unique strengths while responding to the changing expectations of employers and students. This involves not only marketing the program but building trust, credibility, and recognition—elements that are central to long-term institutional success.

4. Research Methods

Our work employs a case study research design to evaluate brand- and image-construction strategies within the MBA and EMBA programs operating in Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU). It is part of a comprehensive study conducted between 2022 and 2023 to investigate PR strategy building as well as entrepreneurial education with specific reference to agro-entrepreneurship sectors, and how institutional branding enhances competitiveness of programs.

4.1. Data gathering and design of our study

A mixed-method design was employed with a blend of qualitative as well as quantitative strategies to achieve a general understanding. Focus groups were conducted along with personal interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders, including faculty members, school administrators, undergraduate/graduate students, and industry professionals. These

discussions explored perceptions of KazNARU's MBA brand, the effectiveness of its image-building initiatives, and its alignment with labor market expectations.

In addition, focus groups with business leaders, entrepreneurs, and alumni were organized to examine the program's reputation and perceived value in the business community. These sessions provided qualitative data on how branding efforts—such as digital campaigns, guest lectures, and international collaborations—impact the attractiveness of the MBA program.

A questionnaire-based survey was administered to current MBA and EMBA students to gather quantitative data on their experiences, satisfaction levels, and perceptions of the program's brand identity. The survey included questions on the effectiveness of marketing tools, the role of social media, and the perceived credibility of KazNARU's MBA brand compared to competitors. For the purpose of this study, we use answers to a single multiple-choice question.

4.2. Limitations of the Study

Despite strengths, several limitations can be discovered in a study. Firstly, the study is only restricted to a single institution (KazNARU), which can restrict generalizability of results to other Central Asian or Kazakhstani universities. Secondly, sample size for surveys and focus grouping is also low, which can affect statistical reliability of results. Finally, a study primarily only captures perceptions at a single point (2022–2023) but does not capture long-run branding effects or fluctuation market scenarios fully.¹

5. Analysis

It is found from an analysis of KazNARU's EMBA and MBA programs that an overall transition is being undertaken by the institution from traditional marketing strategies to brand development and image-building strategies to reinforce its position within the market for business schools. As part of this study, a survey and a series of stakeholder interviews were conducted to identify the challenges

¹ The questionnaire-based survey study was conducted in April-May 2023 among the MBA/EMBA at Kazakh National Agrarian Research University (KazNARU). The students answered multiple-choice questions with multiple answer options. The research team identified a pool of potential survey participants from the list of MBA/EMBA students (class 2022–2023).

and opportunities associated with creating a distinctive and competitive brand for KazNARU's MBA programs. This section synthesizes these findings, drawing from survey data, qualitative insights, and the perspectives of key stakeholders, including students, alumni, faculty, and industry partners.

5.1. Perceptions of Image-Building Priorities

The survey posed a core question to respondents: "What prospects do you see for developing a positive image of the MBA/EMBA program at KazNARU to attract new master's students?"

Participants were presented with a list of initiatives and asked to rank their importance in enhancing the program's image. These responses, aggregated in Figure 1, present a snapshot of stakeholders' concerns:

As is evident from the data, internationalization is the top motivator for brand image with 40% of participants putting a high priority for collaborative learning with preeminent global universities. It is also aligned with international trends where collaboration with globally accredited institutions greatly enhances programme credibility as well as graduate employability.

Following location priority cited by 33% of participants came priority for facilitating academic exchange programs (Figure 1). It suggests that students and stakeholders equate a program's brand value to exposure to a global environment, cross-cultural learning opportunity, as well as dual degrees. These elements function as prestige indicators but also as functional value additions to an MBA graduate's career profile.

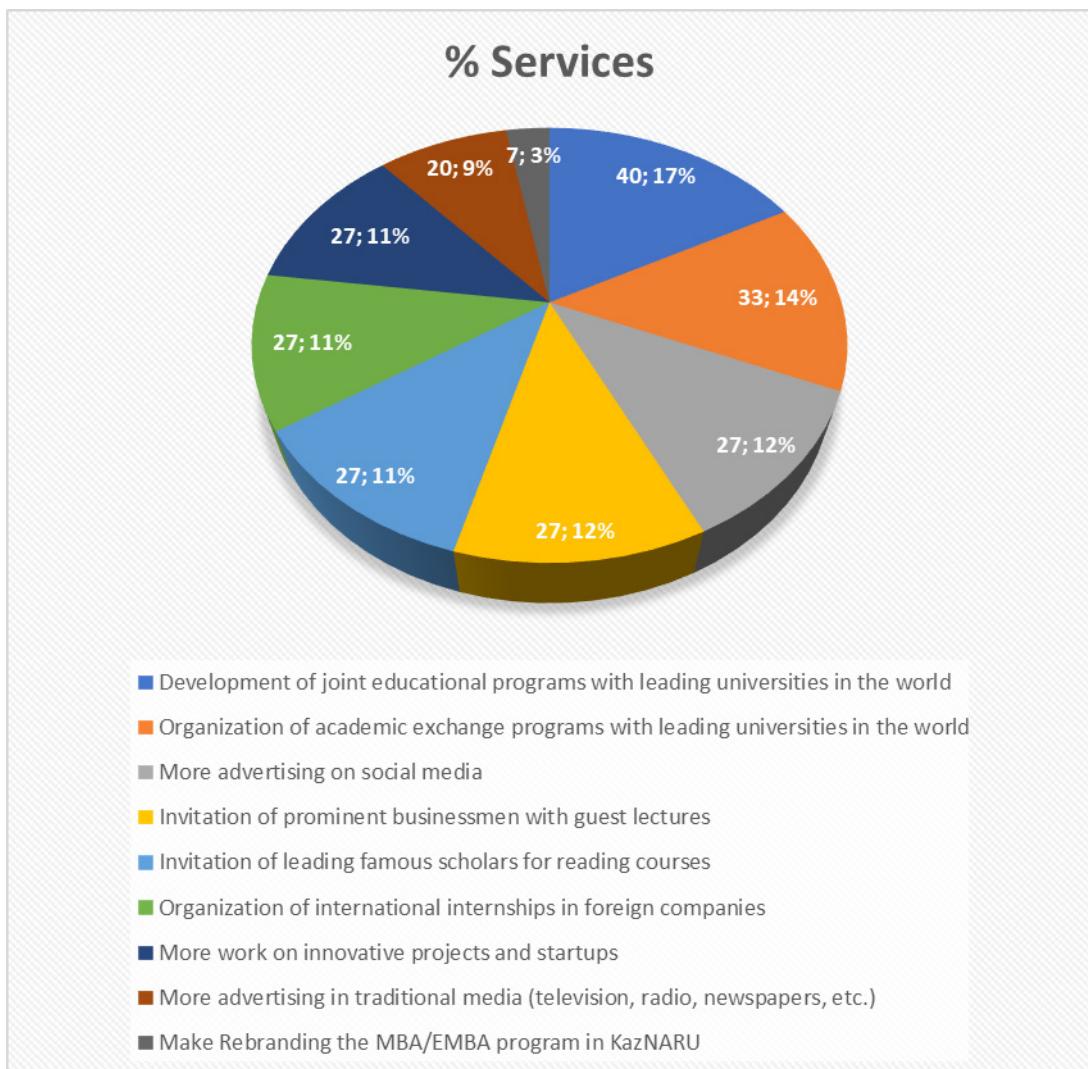


Figure 1 – The results – survey study

More than a fourth of the respondents (27%) (Figure 1) mentioned social media advertising and online interaction as a priority set of tools to build a positive brand image. Respondents showed how critical the digital channel is to reach younger digitally aware communities, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the students consume content mostly on social media platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok. Successful utilization of digital media is as much a function of marketing as a critical component of brand storytelling aiding in sharing success cases, alumni success profiles, as well as value propositions that are unique to programs.

Similarly, 27% of participants (Figure 1) also stressed the need to engage high-profile business executives and reputable professors to talk to students through guest lectures or short courses. These interactions not only enhance the practical learning experience but also create associations of prestige and credibility, reinforcing KazNARU's MBA brand as a program that connects students to real-world practical expertise applicable in different sectors of the national economy.

5.3. Emerging Trends: Innovation and Startups

The survey also revealed a growing emphasis on innovative projects and startups, with 27% of respondents advocating for stronger integration of entrepreneurial initiatives within the MBA curriculum. This aligns with research showing that university brands associated with innovation and applied learning are more positively perceived by students and employers (Pinar et al., 2014; Schlesinger et al., 2021). This reflects a broader shift in MBA branding, where innovation hubs, incubators, and startup accelerators are increasingly perceived as defining features of a high-quality business program. KazNARU's focus on agro-entrepreneurship provides a unique niche; however, stakeholders stressed the need to highlight this specialization more prominently in the program's branding narrative, positioning it as a distinctive strength in both local and international markets.

5.4. Traditional Media vs. Modern Branding Tools

Only 20% of respondents favored traditional advertising channels such as television, radio, and newspapers (Figure 1). This relatively low percentage highlights a critical trend: traditional marketing efforts are losing relevance compared to digital and experiential branding strategies. Stakeholders argued that investing in content creation, student

success stories, alumni testimonials, and interactive campaigns on digital platforms is far more effective in shaping the perception of program quality and prestige.

Interestingly, only 7% of respondents supported a full-scale rebranding of KazNARU's MBA and EMBA programs. This development came somewhat as a surprise because renaming is a common strategy among Kazakhstani university programs to update the image. But stakeholders were skeptical, saying that seriousness and consistent communications are better than token renaming measures. What they instead suggested was for KazNARU to strengthen its established identity by emphasizing a unique area of specialty—i.e., being able to focus on such areas as agricultural business and entrepreneurship—while further intensifying collaborative moves with foreign institutions.

5.5. Stakeholder Perceptions regarding Brand Perception

Surveys and focus groups among faculty members, graduates, government officials, and business executives provided additional insights into how KazNARU's MBA program is perceived. Three broad-based themes were evident:

1. Global Presence – Students and graduates noted that cooperation with world-class overseas universities together with participation in exchange programs seriously enhance the program's credibility. They noted that cooperative programs with double degrees and shared research endeavors seriously facilitate building an immediate global presence.

2. Practical orientation – In their reply, stakeholders also emphasized practical experience with practical businesses, including guest industry speakers, international internships, and practical case applications. These contribute much to perceived value.

3. Digital Branding and Storytelling – Many participants put great stress on maintaining a consistent online brand identity. They also recommended using social media platforms, alumni profiles, and interactive digital campaigns to create a stronger emotional connection with prospective students.

5.6. Strategic Implications

From these conclusions, KazNARU's EMBA and MBA programs should frame themselves to establish their brand image by internationalizing, digitally branding, and utilizing experiential learning. Rather than investing heavily in traditional marketing or high-cost rebranding strategies, the university

should affirm its established brand identity through showcasing its niche expertise in agro-entrepreneurship and expanding its international image through collaborative academic programs.

Moreover, a multi-channel branding strategy incorporating digital instruments, alumni networks, and collaboration with industry partners is highlighted by the survey. Emphasizing success cases, having guest lecturers by renowned business leaders, and boosting presence within online communities surrounding business education can be part of a stronger and more credible image for KazNARU.

5.7. Challenges to be Addressed

KazNARU's MBA is a one with a lot of potential to expand its brand influence but several critical hurdles to cross. These include constrained resources for executing large-scale international partnerships and marketing efforts, the ongoing need to distinguish its identity from well-established programs such as those at KIMEP and AlmaU, and the comparatively slower integration of digital branding tools relative to global standards. Additionally, the university must enhance its alumni engagement, develop targeted storytelling campaigns, and improve visibility in international rankings to compete more effectively. Overcoming these challenges calls for a thoughtful approach that balances innovation with authenticity and strategic resource use, ensuring the brand effectively communicates the program's unique strengths and competitive value.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

Our examination of KazNARU's EMBA programme specifically, amidst the overall landscape of Kazakhstan's changing current education scenario, creates a critical transition from traditional marketing practices to strategic brand building and PR management. What comes to light is that even though Kazakhstan has made substantial strides to rejuvenate its business education landscape, industry is still primarily in a nascent stage with respect to the development of distinctive competitive education brands, more so for niche programs such as agro-entrepreneurship.

Initially, then, the research identifies a persistent gap within business education perceptions within Kazakhstan. There is a common sentiment that only practical experience properly prepares one in management and business skills, with academically-based programs being overly theoretical and

therefore less practical. Such a sentiment devalues programs with professionally structured business education like MBAs. KazNARU and institutions of a similar type have to counteract such a perceived image vs. reality gap by referencing practical learning environments such as collaborative projects with industry, internships, case analysis, and practitioner links. Through demonstration of practical results—successful graduates finding employment or entrepreneurial activity commenced—KazNARU is able to enhance perceived relevance alongside credibility within its offer of an MBA.

Secondly, a volatile labor market and rapidly changing skill environment mean that business schools have to reinvent themselves repeatedly and create robust positive brand attachments. Employers nowadays demand graduates who are stronger theoretically but also possessing practical skills relevant to leadership, digital enterprise, and international entrepreneurship. KazNARU's competitive niche position is a specialization in agribusiness and agro-entrepreneurship, but such a niche needs to be organically integrated into a comprehensive brand storytelling framework that communicates a value proposition to local as well as international stakeholders.

Finally, internationalization is also cited in the report as one of the cornerstones of brand building. Survey participants as well as stakeholders noted that collaborative connections with leading international universities, dual degrees, as well as exchange programs, represent some of the most efficient publicity- and prestige- building strategies for KazNARU's MBA. International collaborations not only lend credibility to an institution but also give students access to international benchmarks of excellence as well as networks central to a knowledge-based world.

Finally, according to the study, branding must look beyond standardized advertising campaigns. While PR tools such as print and media advertising still have some value, the educational brand today is developed with digital storytelling, frank stakeholder communication, and a robust identification of unique program strengths. In addition, social media, alumni networks, and thought leadership activities are crucial for creating and sustaining an impactful institutional image.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to strengthen the brand and image-building strategy using a case study of KazNARU's MBA program:

6.1. Develop a Distinctive Brand Identity

The case study of KazNARU suggests that universities should define and consistently communicate its unique value proposition (UVP). For the MBA and EMBA programs, this UVP can be centered on agro-entrepreneurship, sustainability, and industry-relevant innovation, areas where KazNARU already has strengths. By highlighting how its curriculum combines occupational acumen with sectoral expertise in agribusiness, KazNARU can differentiate itself from competitors like KIMEP or AlmaU, which focus on broader management themes. There should be a comprehensive branding framework developed with a unique brand narrative, visual identity, and communications voice to be maintained across all marketing and communications channels.

6.2. Strengthening Digital Branding and Bridges to Society

Online channels present an accessible and scalable platform to establish a strategic brand for higher education. As part of raising its profile and international visibility, the case of KazNARU illustrates a need to create a content-based digital marketing strategy focused on showcasing alumni success profiles, faculty thought leadership through blogs and webinars, and interactive campaigns to showcase student experience and international collaboration. Strategic uses of sponsored advertising across platforms including LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook can broaden reach to home-based as well as international markets for students. Of equal value is creating a multilingual online presence for Kazakh, Russian, and English to showcase KazNARU as an inclusive institution with a global profile focused on excellence and innovation in learning.

6.3. Expand International Components

Strategic collaborations with highly acclaimed universities globally should be a high priority for HEI internationalization strategy. Joint initiatives—such as joint MBA or dual degrees, exchange or faculty programs for students, or jointly sponsored research projects or scholarly meetings—can increase institution credibility and provide high-level international exposure. In addition to enhancing scholarly enrichment, such collaborations also serve as effective branding tools if promoted via communications campaigns. In publicizing such collaborations as part of its outreach campaign, KazNARU can strengthen its image, enhance perceived value for its scholarly programs, and position itself as

a competitive, internationally networked institution with a presence within the sphere of business schooling.

6.4. Combining Experiential and Practical

Experiential learning is essential to creating a competitive and credible MBA brand. To make it even more relevant to the market, universities should complement its coverage with workshops & guest talks by industry practitioners & successful entrepreneurs with case-based learning & business simulation projects. Innovation labs & incubators for startups can be created to support student-based entrepreneurial projects further; industry internships & consulting projects will allow interaction with the business community directly. These learning strategies through experience aim to enhance quality academically but look to reinforce KazNARU's identity as a hands-on, future-focused training institution with industry & global management competence.

6.5. Build a Strong Alumni and Corporate Network

Alumni profiles are a critical asset to establishing a strong brand for an MBA programme, especially in newer markets such as Kazakhstan. To take advantage of this, Kazakhstani universities would be well served to set up an active alumni association to enable networking, mentoring, and collaboration with recruiters. Highlighting alumni success with both local and international sectors can be a potent addition to the university's brand story. Strategic industry partnerships, including with a focus on agribusiness, should be sought to establish avenues for internships, collaborative research, and graduate hiring. Brand-building should also be approached as an ongoing process incorporating data analysis. Surveys and focus groups with students, alumni, and recruiters should be conducted regularly to yield actionable information, where monitoring metrics such as visibility, quality of applications, recruitment trends, and recruiter feedback will allow branding strategies to stay responsive, focused, and effective. Business schools can position themselves distinctly to be champion professional education brands for Eurasia and Kazakhstan with their focus on sustainable corporate behaviors and agro-entrepreneurship. It can increase their profile and competitive standing by using these strategies described here—building a rich brand storytelling, making effective uses of digital media platforms, forging stronger international alliances, and infusing experiential learning. Ultimately, the shift from traditional marketing to

holistic brand-building will not only attract more students but also strengthen KazNARU's position as a trusted partner for industry and international stakeholders, ensuring the long-term sustainability and impact of its MBA programs.

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